CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter I review the relevant conceptual and research literature that underpins my study. It is within this theoretical and practical framework that I situate and pursue my case study on dialogue journal writing. I begin by focusing on the developmental mismatches between spoken language, which is acquired naturally, and written language, which is learned formally in school, to show how learning to write does not follow the natural acquisition process of oral language. Notwithstanding, the learning of oral and written language shares a similarity - that in order to learn to speak and write, learners need the presence of a more competent user to facilitate the learning. Thus social considerations are important in language learning. I highlight the concepts of scaffolding, zone of proximal development and appropriation to emphasise the social process of learning and to explain that dialogue journalling is premised on these concepts. It is salutary to note that I draw on the works of many scholars and researchers to enable me to present a comprehensive review of dialogue journal writing. Primarily, in this chapter my focus is on written and spoken language, social considerations in language learning, learning and writing in school, dialogue journal writing as well as research on dialogue journal writing.

2.1   Written and Spoken Language

The development of written language, which is a second order acquisition, is dependent on the development of the spoken language which is acquired first

(Garton & Pratt, 1989). However, the fact that spoken language develops naturally outside school while written language requires formal instruction causes writing to be judged by school norms such as correctness, cohesion and genre rather than by developmental norms (Shuy, 1988b). This may shed light on why children have problems with writing. I will elaborate on this below.

The acquisitional process of oral language follows a natural real world context. Citing Joo, Shuy (1988b) categorises the five styles of language as intimate, casual, consultative, formal and frozen. Shuy asserts that by the time children reach school age, they would have experienced at least the intimate and casual styles of speaking which serve many functions for getting things done. He also suggests that children probably first encounter the consultative style in school while the formal style is probably acquired during late adolescence or adulthood. Additionally, he opines that the monologue skill of speaking in front of an audience without feedback or interruption is not required of many people even in their adult lives. In contrast to this, the writing done in school does not follow a natural acquisition sequence.

Writing as practised in school follows the "essayist tradition" where there is a minimal functional focus, non-interactional form of making sense and an imagined unknown audience (Shuy, 1988b). If in speech we say what we want to say and have control of our own topics, in writing the topic is teacher-generated and children are asked to use language to do what the teacher wants. Additionally, the writing style children are expected to use in school is formal rather than casual. Thus, teaching and assessment of writing do not follow natural acquisition process. This mismatch in developmental sequence between speech and the type of writing

children are expected to do in school may account for the reason why writing is a difficult skill to master.

In spite of the fact that spoken language precedes written language developmentally, yet socio-culturally, there is a close inter-relationship between these two (Garton & Pratt, 1989). Significantly, for both spoken and written language the child requires assistance – usually adult assistance. Crucial for facilitating literacy development is an interested adult interacting with the child to assist, guide and support the child's spoken and written language development. It is obvious that social considerations have a role to play in language development as language does not develop in isolation. Thus the influence of the child's social environment in shaping, encouraging and moulding language competencies must not be dismissed.

2.2   Social Considerations in Language Learning

Stemming from the theoretical notions forwarded by Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1981) and Bruner (1983), there has been increased interest in the role of social interaction in language development. Consequently, research has extended to focus on the social interactional roots of language development. However, Mercer (1994) notes that what has still to emerge is a robust theory of teaching and learning as social practice. To fill this gap, he proposes a 'neo-Vygotskian theory'. Mercer suggests that a neo-Vygotskian theoretical perspective not only incorporates elements of Vygotsky's work but also draws on post-Vygotskian research to build new theoretical links which are concerned with language use as well as teaching and learning in social context. Essentially, the neo-Vygotskian

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framework has as its cornerstone the three concepts of scaffolding, the zone of proximal development and appropriation. It reflects,

a radical shift from the notion of learners as isolated individuals who succeed or fail by their own resources, towards a view of learning as a situated, culturally-contextualized activity. The concept of 'scaffolding' represents one crucial aspect of such activity, whereby learners' success or failure is often dependent on the quality of the direct or indirect contribution made by others (Mercer, 1994, p. 101).

Following, I will provide a brief explanation of what the neo-Vygotskian concepts of scaffolding, zone of proximal development and appropriation entail.

2.2.1   Scaffolding

Bruner (1977) maintains that appropriate social interactional frameworks are necessary for learning to take place. He calls this scaffolding. Cazden (1983) coined the term 'interactional scaffolding' to refer to the way a more experienced peer or adult, through social interaction with the learner, provides a process for the learner to solve a problem or do a task which would be beyond the learner's ability if no assistance is provided. Building on Bruner's concept of scaffolding, Maybin, Mercer and Stierer (1992) defines scaffolding as help

which will enable a learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been quite able to manage on their own, and it is help which is intended to bring the learner closer to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own (p. 188).

Applebee (1986) emphasises that for instructional scaffolding to be effective it must provide opportunities for students to contribute to the learning as it evolves so that students will have a sense of ownership in the learning process. Additionally, he stresses that writing activity assigned to students must also serve real communicative functions that go beyond the desire to please the teacher.

2.2.2 Zone of Proximal Development

As expounded by Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance in collaboration with more able peers (p. 86)." Within the neo-Vygotskian framework, learning and problem solving are context-bound processes and this implies that the level of understanding or success of problem solving that an individual achieves in specific settings is reckoned to be partially a function of those settings as dynamic contexts for cognitive activity (Mercer, 1994). The concept of ZPD postulates that learning achievements are, at least in part, situationally determined. Thus the actual and potential levels of achievement of an individual's cognitive potential and learning strategies are reflective of the strength of the cultural framework which supports it. It is therefore pertinent for us to focus on the processes of learning and instruction as manifested in particular events as well as look at the relationship between teachers and learners in those events (Mercer, 1994) if we want to improve our practice.

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The significance of ZPD means that tasks assigned to students should build upon the knowledge and skills that they already possess. Ideally, the tasks should be pitched at the 'i + 1' level - with 'i' representing students' actual development and 'i + 1' their potential language development (Krashen, 1985) - to ensure that they are difficult enough for new learning to take place.

2.2.3 Appropriation

Mercer (1994) states that appropriation is "concerned with what meanings children may take from encounters with objects in cultural context (p. 105)" and consequently their initial understandings may be culturally-defined. Appropriation provides a link to Bakhtin's concept of 'voice' as a means of "representing the intellectual presence of more than one person in the authorship of a text (p. 105)" and it is used in discussing children's social and linguistic enculturation (Mercer, 1994). Explaining this concept, Bakhtin (1981) says, "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (pp. 293-294)". It is his contention that words are individualized and given specific shapes in living interaction and that they are appropriated in the process of dialoguing with another person. Newman et al. (cited in Mercer, 1994) use appropriation to explain the pedagogical function of a particular kind of discourse event in which one person takes up another's word and offers it back in a modified form. Through strategic appropriation of children's words and actions, teachers can help them relate their thoughts and actions to the expanded boundaries of educational knowledge. Crucial to appropriation is

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educational discourse as it is the means (spoken or written) by which concepts are shared and differing interpretations can be revealed and resolved. In this regard, dialogue journal writing can serve to promote a dialogic approach to literacy in school. But to what extent is learning and writing in school really dialogic?

2.3   Learning and Writing in School

Vygotsky (1978) maintains that through the dynamic social process of learning, the teacher in dialogue with a student can focus on emerging skills and abilities. Touching on this concept, Freire (1970), in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, distinguishes between two kinds of education: banking and libertarian. The 'banking' concept, has a 'central bank', which according to Shor (1992), is a metaphoric repository of official knowledge comprising components such as the standardized syllabus, established scientific and technical knowledge and correct standard usage for writing and speaking. Banking education sees the student as a passive depository, a 'disengaged brain', waiting to be filled by the teacher depositor who draws from the central bank. Conversely, libertarian education views the teacher and students as partners in acts of cognition as they engage in meaning-making via communication. The process is a dialogic one and it benefits both teachers and students as they learn from each other in the social process.

However, in many schools, learning tends to be disembedded for students. Instead of students asking questions because they want to know something, the teacher normally tells students what they should know or set problems for them to solve (Garton & Pratt, 1989). Similarly, influential studies of writing in secondary schools reveal that most forms of writing produced at school are done in response

uestions given by the teacher or to complete an assignment (Hudelson, 1989).
sequently, students get the impression that writing is done for someone and not oneself. In other words, the basic function of writing is to display one's wledge of specific structures and forms and it is the teacher's job to ensure that ents' writing conforms to these. In essence then, the teacher's role is an uative one (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Applebee, 4).

The above view contrasts with the writing process as suggested by ilebee (1986) and many others. To them writing is a process of discovery, a ' of helping students to think through, organize their ideas and then write and se their drafts. The audience for writing responds not to the forms and ctures used but rather to the writer's attempts to create meaning.

For writing to be authentic, it must happen under the same conditions essary for any real-life communication. These conditions are that the writer it have real reasons to write and the freedom to write on any self-chosen topics. ecessitates that the writer and audience have a functional relationship whereby audience has to interact and respond to the writer's message in some way iton, 1988b).

I now like to draw on some research carried out in Malaysia on the teaching ESL writing to see how it measures with what has been discussed thus far.

In the Malaysian context, writing instruction tends to be examination driven ecially in classes where students have to sit for public examinations. In such sses, Khatija's (1998) study indicates that teachers 'teach to the test' and that ting exercises are usually practice tests that follow examination formats or

genres. Nagalingam's (1994) findings on what teachers do when they say they teach writing reveals that teachers still favour the traditional model of writing instruction and, additionally, they consider writing as something to be evaluated. As well, a survey report by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) on writing instruction conducted in schools in Negeri Sembilan shows that despite CDC's effort to encourage process writing in schools, teachers prefer using the teacher-centred traditional approach with its emphasis on grammatical accuracy during writing lessons (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1992).

While students long for education that is relevant, that can help them make sense of their lives and the world around them, schools remain traditional and unresponsive to their needs. With their primary concern for the cognitive or intellectual aspect of learning, schools have sometimes been regarded as oppressive places governed by bureaucratic rules that suppress spontaneity and creativity. This echoes the humanistic movement's critique that schools are rigid and dehumanized, paying scant attention to students' affective needs and individuality (Moskowitz, 1978). Arthur W. Combs, a psychologist (cited in Moskowitz, 1978), amplifies this when he writes:

> Billions of dollars and billions of man hours are currently being expended in attempts to reform education. Unhappily much of this effort is foredoomed to be wasted because it concentrates on the wrong problem . . . Teachers have long been expert in providing information . . . Our major failures do not arise from lack of information. They come from . . . our inability to help students discover the personal meaning of the information we so extravagantly provide them . . . Our preoccupation with information .

. . has dehumanized our schools, alienated our youths, and produced a system irrelevant for most students (pp. 235-236).

It goes without saying that if school wants to foster the development of alanced individuals, it should strike a balance between emphasising the nic side of education and giving consideration to the personal aspect. Ideally, ild be concerned to help students develop fulfilling relationships, achieve ial, express feelings, share as well as give and receive support (Moskowitz,

This calls for the combination of subject matter with the feelings, emotions, ences and lives of the students. When this occurs learning will be seen as nt and related to students' lives and this can lead to their feeling more self-ized. The discovery that their thoughts, feelings and experiences are valued ool will make students value school in return. By extension, linking such a iistic pedagogy to the teaching of ESL will help engender in students more /e feelings for learning the second language.

I would like to suggest that dialogue journal writing is responsive to the ⟩f pedagogy discussed above. As such, it is pertinent that we take a look at evance of dialogue journal writing and the research findings pertaining to it.

Dialogue Journal Writing

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher unicate in a bound notebook, disk or file, over an extended period of time. ·ding to Peyton (1992), students can write as much as they want on topics of ;hoice and the teacher writes back regularly to the students, often responding students' topics, introducing new topics and asking questions. Rather than

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assuming the role of an evaluator who corrects and comments on the writing, the teacher assumes the role of a participant with each student in an ongoing written conversation.

In dialogue journal writing, students are empowered to write on topics that are close to their hearts (Peyton, 1992; Staton, 1988a). They can choose to write about personal concerns and issues that are of significance to them – things related to their public world of school or their private world outside school. The topics may be introduced briefly and dropped or sustained for several exchanges. This interactive communication extends the teacher's contact time with a particular student, thereby allowing the teacher to know the student in a way that may not otherwise be possible. This knowledge can help establish strong personal ties between the teacher and student. Consequently, it can enhance motivation in second language learning.

Writing, like anything else, grows with practice. It is acquired and developed through meaningful and continued writing. While the personal journal gives students practice in writing, it does not push students to go beyond what they already know. In contrast, written dialogue with a teacher provides a student guided assistance in expressing ideas and feelings and in describing and elaborating on experience (Staton, 1991). This allows the student individualized access to a wiser and more experienced person as well as a more competent user of the language. Additionally, dialogue journal writing with the teacher enables students to think through critical and important issues with the help of a valued other. Analogous to the act of 'iron sharpening iron', this process will help enhance students' critical thinking skills.

In writing to the student, the teacher is able to illustrate more complex
...lage usage, linguistic devices, spelling, punctuation, and structure within the
...e of topics selected by the student (Staton, 1988a, Sperling, 1996). Thus, the
...ler's writing becomes the student's reading input and by writing back and
...with the student, the teacher is providing an 'interactional scaffolding'
...den, 1983) to push the student to a higher level of learning which he or she
...ld otherwise not be able to achieve on his or her own. The teacher and student
appropriate each other's words and ideas in the process. Learning becomes bi-
...tional and social rather than individualistic.

In normal circumstances when we use language for communication we
...ct meaning from it without consciously focusing on its structures or forms.
...ever if we choose to, we can also focus on the language. By virtue of the fact
...writing is thoughts encoded in print, it helps to make 'opaque' language
...tures and forms which are usually transparent or unnoticed (Cazden, 1976). In
...r words, the act of dialogue journal writing helps transform invisible thoughts
...isible print, thereby allowing students to go 'meta' with their internalized
...gue (Bruner, 1988). By reflecting on their writing, students' metalinguistic
...petence, which is essential for successful learning, is developed (Garton &
...t, 1989). Similarly, Haley-James (1982) maintains that when the component
...ght and language elements are made opaque through writing, the mind finds it
...er to grasp the act and the content of complex thought.

As mentioned earlier, in written dialogue the teacher does not play the role
...'default' evaluator but responds as an interested person to students' writing.
...s affective focus facilitates learning through the establishment of interpersonal

iip. Rogers (1983), a well-known psychologist, emphasizes that teachers

ommunicate openly and empathetically with their students and vice versa

ant to facilitate learning. Crucially, such openness and empathy often arise

as a result of the student partaking in written dialogue with the teacher.

rom the discussion thus far, it is evident that underpinning dialogue

vriting is the neo-Vygotskian theory of scaffolding, zone of proximal

1ent and appropriation. Not less important too is the fact that humanistic

:arian orientations are central to its conception.

itherto, I have theorized about the benefits of dialogue journal writing by

on the relevant literature. In the next section I will turn to grounded data

hey corroborate what has been discussed above.

.esearch on Dialogue Journal Writing

:olmes and Moulton (1997) used ethnographic tools to investigate

perspectives on the use of dialogue journals as an ESL learning strategy.

:ey participants in their study were ESL students who were enrolled in a

intermediate composition class in an urban southwestern US university.

idings indicated that these ESL students considered dialogue journal

ɔ be an effective strategy for learning and their reflections in the journals

a gradual development in writing fluency and motivation throughout the

hese students used words such as "easier", "comfortable", "better",

', "quickly" and "improve" to describe the improvement in their writing

Holmes & Moulton, 1997, p. 617). The students noted that the ability to

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-select topics contributed to their growing fluency. They were able to compose

h ease and speed without depending on dictionaries and translation. The

dom of expression in their journals helped students focus on the interactive

ects of their writing which in turn led to increased fluency. Spack and Sadow's

dy (1983) also attributed the success of dialogue journalling to the fact that

rnals allow students to write about topics that interest them. Congruent with

, Staton (1988b), who studied Reed's 1979-80 class of six-graders, noticed that

re is a direct correlation between the ability to choose one's own topics in

nmunication and attainment in students' self-knowledge and concept formation

well as principles for understanding the world.

Spack and Sadow (1983) also reported that their students felt comfortable

ut their writing because the teacher responded in a non-judgmental manner.

o concurring with this, Holmes and Moulton (1997) observed that their

dents' motivation to write was enhanced as the writing allowed them to test

ir thoughts and take greater risks in English without the threat of evaluation.

pressing their opinions on this, the students used words like, "no scare", "like to

ite more", "feel good", "feel free", and "excited" (p. 619).

In his report concerning the studies on topic maintenance and elaboration in

dialogue journals of Reed's 1979-80 class, Shuy (1988b) revealed that the

dents wrote more and better as the writing involved necessary information and

inion exchange in real context. Peyton (1988a) who studied Reed's interaction

h one particular student noted that the student demonstrated a developmental

gress. From writing that recounted shared knowledge with little information the

dent progressed to explicitly interactive writing that gave information in

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response to teacher questions, to implicitly interactive writing in which the student anticipated the teacher's questions and provided information.

This trend was also observed in a different study on an unmotivated fifth grade Mexican-American. Whisler (1992) professed that although her student's in-class writing was incohesive, he was able to produce entries that resembled well-structured paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details in his interactive writing. In similar fashion, research by Hudelson (1984) and Kreef (1984) suggested that dialogue journal is beneficial in promoting LEP (Low English Proficiency) students' writing skill.

Indeed, dialogue journal writing can contribute to students' development in many ways. Reed's (1988) investigation on the use of dialogue journals in her own classroom context indicated that there was development in reading and math comprehension. In addition to that, comprehension at the emotional level involving moral rights and wrongs and sensitivity to other people also developed. Vanett and Jurich (1990) used journal writing with their class of non-native adult ESL learners. They found that by taking part in interactive writing, the students developed a greater understanding of the importance of audience, which helped to shape their writing. On the teachers' part they were better able to understand their students' feelings instead of behaving like the omniscient, all-knowing teachers. Staton's study (1988b) also linked dialogue journal writing to the development of students' communicating, thinking and learning skills. Her observation that the "dialogue journal combination of purposeful, heuristic writing and the dialogic, responsive structure create cognitive demands on the student to elaborate his or her

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in thinking, and to become involved in examining the situation from the rspective of another person (p. 317)" lends support to this.

Furthermore, Bahruth (1992) studied the dialogue journals of children of egal migrant farm workers in a bilingual fifth grade classroom. She noticed provement in writing skills despite there being no emphasis placed on form. owever, a study by Shelton (1992) concerning high school students' writing vealed that there was no improvement in students' writing as they continued to peat the same errors in their writing throughout the year.

Also on the negative aspect, Anderson (1993) reported that the use of urnals is not without its problems. He asserted that students have complained out being 'journalled' to death because of its ubiquitous use in many classes. eath (cited by Anderson, 1993) cautioned that journals which are too personal in raise ethical issues that may result in legal ramifications. As well, students may so use the journal as a license for expressing bigotry and prejudice.

It cannot be disputed that the use of dialogue journal writing is a highly contextualised event. Some teachers may have a lot of success with it while others ay not find it too helpful. However, if used judiciously, there seems to be general dications that as a tool for learning, the use of dialogue journal writing is romising and has immense potential in facilitating literacy.

In this chapter, I have drawn extensively on the relevant literature to help tuate this study within its theoretical and practical paradigm. In the next chapter I ill move on to discuss the procedures I used for gathering and analysing the data r this study.